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# **Regionalism in Southeast Asia: The Growth of ASEAN**

**A Research Paper**

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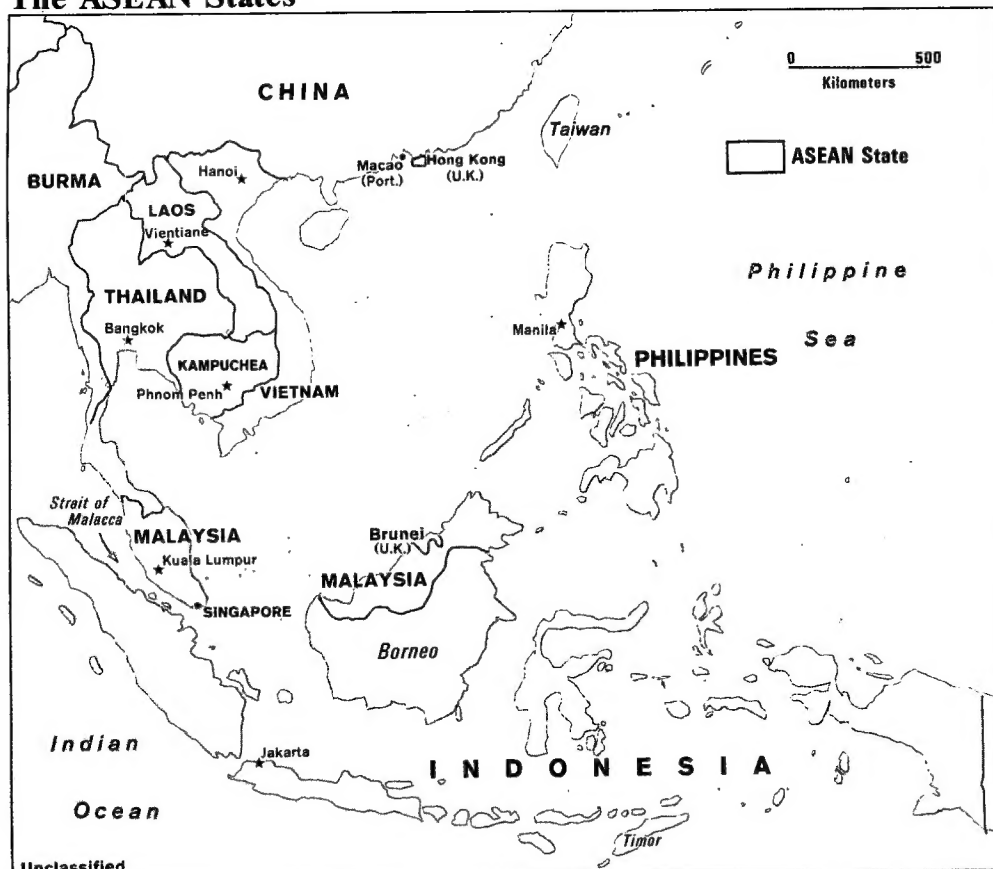
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## The ASEAN States



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**Regionalism in Southeast Asia:  
The Growth of ASEAN**

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**Overview**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand—was founded in 1967 as an economic, social, and cultural organization, but its main achievements have been political and diplomatic. Initially, it devoted its energies to preventing bilateral squabbles from escalating into serious conflict; in the process member states developed the common objective of preserving ASEAN even at the cost of leaving some problems unresolved. In 1975 the emergence of Vietnam as a potential threat to regional stability, combined with ASEAN's perception of declining US interest in the area, gave the association the momentum and cohesion it previously lacked. As a result, its leaders began to try to exert direct influence on policy and events affecting the region.

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The association's political successes, however, rest on a weak foundation. The ASEAN method of decisionmaking through gradual consensus has enhanced unity but resulted in inaction in some areas. The difficulties in translating policies established at summit meetings into coordinated and effective joint efforts are most obvious in the economic arena.

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ASEAN's common philosophy of economic development has enhanced close economic cooperation, but—except for Singapore—the dependency of its member states on commodity and labor-intensive industry exports makes for competition. Efforts to develop joint economic projects founder because short-term national benefits still take precedence over potential long-term regional gains. Elaborate structures for economic interaction thus produce no substantive cooperation. In part, the economic successes of the individual member states during the 1970s work against cooperation by making it less crucial to short-term development. Growing cooperation in the private sector in recent years, however, could hold the key to greater regional economic integration.

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ASEAN's image as an influential grouping has been enhanced since the mid-1970s by the series of dialogues established with major trading partners. These began in 1972 with the ASEAN-EC dialogue and now include most states with important economic interests in the region. Through these discussions, ASEAN seeks to end tariff restrictions against its manufactured goods, promote greater trade, and encourage foreign private investment. Although efforts to obtain liberal tariff concessions have been disappointing, the dialogues have promoted investment and trade generally and have made ASEAN's trading partners much more sensitive to regional economic concerns and often to political ones as well.

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In recent years, growing foreign policy cooperation among the ASEAN states has made the organization an effective interest bloc in international political forums. This was recently demonstrated by its response to the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea in late 1978. The invasion has also heightened security concerns among the ASEAN states and encouraged greater cooperation among them. Although ASEAN leaders continue to reject a formal multilateral defense grouping, bilateral and occasionally trilateral cooperation in military training and intelligence has intensified and led to discussions of standardization and joint production arrangements for military equipment. ASEAN states, however, continue relying on the West, particularly the United States, for defense against potential external threats.

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ASEAN states are ambivalent toward the United States. On the one hand they wish to avoid too close identification with one of the superpowers; on the other, they believe US economic and security cooperation is crucial to regional development and stability. Some of them believe the United States is not doing as much as it should or could to meet regional economic and political wishes. The ASEAN states want Washington to consult with them before making key foreign policy decisions that will affect the region.

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ASEAN's continued success will depend on many factors, some of which are beyond the control of member states. During the 1980s the leadership in many member states will pass to a new generation. It is not certain that these leaders will be as committed to the regional concept as are the present ones who helped create ASEAN. The association needs to intensify the sense of regional identity among its peoples. Increasing contacts among the political, economic, and military elites of the five states create a sense of common interests at the leadership level, but this has not spread to the public at large, which in many cases does not yet have a firm national, much less a supranational, sense of identity.

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Continued domestic stability of the member states is also crucial to regionalism; the appearance in any of them of serious opposition groups based on an inward-looking nationalism or radical economic philosophies could destroy the basis for cooperation in a regional framework. Outside events and threats could also play their part. Serious differences among member states over the role of China in the region, increased activism of local Muslim groups in response to currents from the Middle East, or efforts by Vietnam to drive a wedge between members will continue to test the commitment of member states to the primacy of regional unity over national fears.

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But unity and regional stability can only be assured by expanding the commonality of political interests to encompass economic, social, and cultural bonds. An act of political will is required to overcome the inherent conflict between national and regional interests.

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